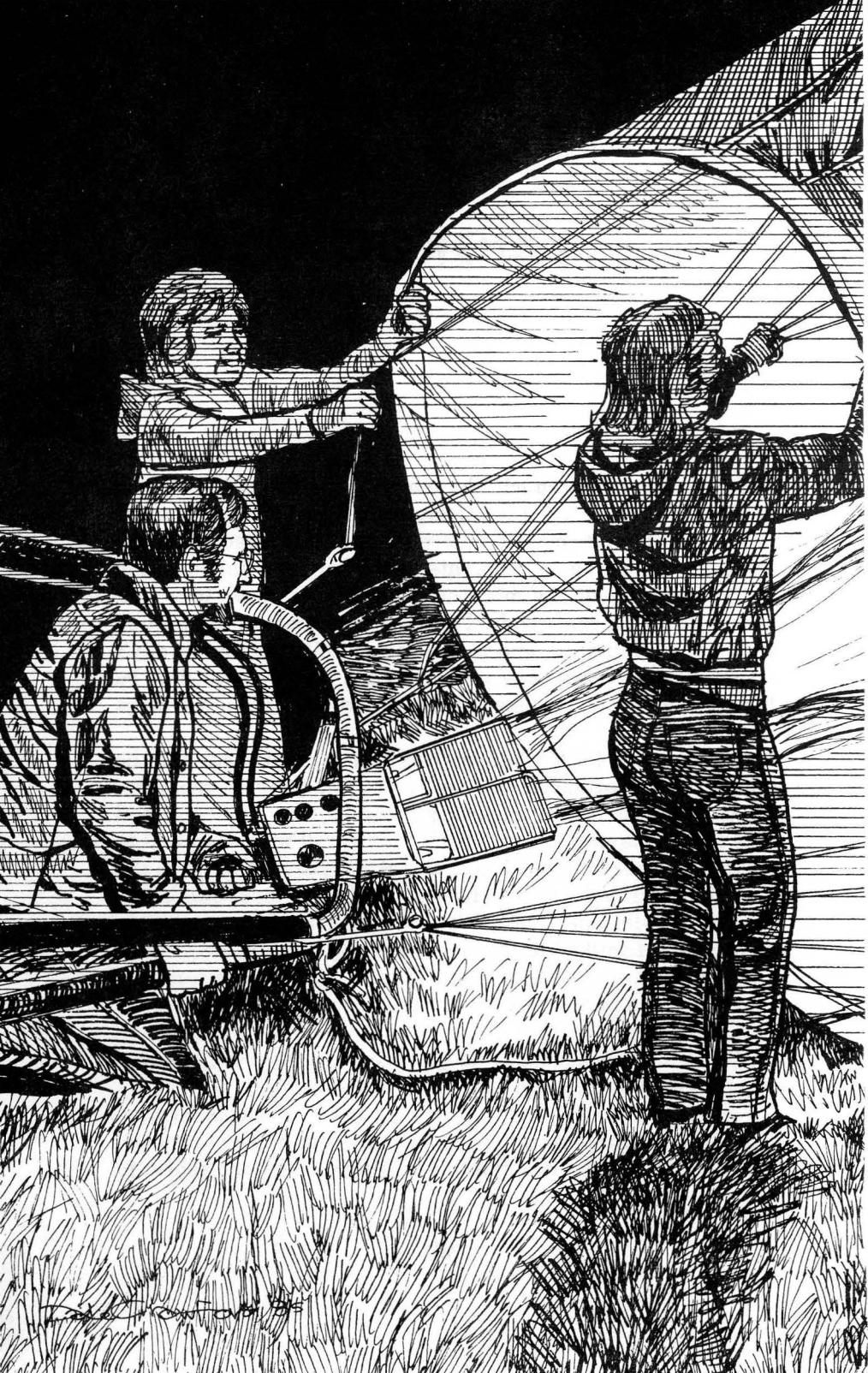




Chapter 8

Hooked!

It was a morning much like many in the two years we had been on the chase crew for George's balloon. We were on the desert land west of Albuquerque and it looked like the weather was going to cooperate. About twenty balloons had gathered for a Sunday morning flight and we were busy getting the balloon gear ready. The crew moved efficiently around the balloon, laughing and talking in anticipation of the day's flying. There was a very gentle breeze, but it seemed to be blowing steadily in one direction so no problems were anticipated.

The envelope for the balloon had been stretched out and the support cables attached. George had picked the crew members for the various jobs. I generally acted as the crew chief and this meant staying free to watch the overall operation and to cover any emergencies. It also meant I assisted George in the cold inflation and this involved a number of tasks preparing the balloon for the flight. We started the inflator and then George and I walked to the top end of the balloon. As cold air was blown into the balloon by the inflator, the parachute top had to be held in place by small tabs to limit the amount of air leaking out.

"Why don't you go in and get the top this time," George suggested as we reached the crown of the balloon.

"Fine," I said and checked the bottoms of my boots for anything that could poke a hole or leave a stain on the envelope. The cold air from the inflator had billowed out the fabric to

expose a large hole where the parachute top fitted. The parachute lay in a pile about six to eight feet inside the balloon. I stepped inside the crown of the balloon, placing my feet very carefully to avoid putting any tension on the cloth that could cause a tear. I untangled the top and its connecting lines and then retraced my steps, pulling the top with me. Once I was back outside I started setting the tabs. George watched carefully, but said nothing. George never yelled at anybody but on the very few occasions where someone had screwed up he would look at you with a look that spoke volumes. Balloon repairs cost plenty. He expected good work from his crew and we took a lot of pride in doing everything just right.

The next job was to pull out the fabric on each side of the balloon so the inflator could fill the envelope more easily. George took one side and I took the other. As the envelope inflated we inspected the whole surface for any small tears and made adjustments in the tension of the fabric to be sure it was filling evenly. We worked the fabric gently and unhurriedly. Little conversation was necessary. Several spectators stood around in small groups watching and occasionally pointing to something or other. A man with a camera moved about taking pictures. Even though I could feel the excitement that always came with the inflation, the easy paced routine of tasks had an oddly soothing effect. I had done the same job probably over 100 times by now and the balloon seemed like a familiar friend. As I walked along, my hand caressed the rippling fabric like petting an old dog.

"It sure is something, isn't it?" a voice said. "I love this part."

George walked up beside me. We stepped back and looked up at the mound of colors expanding against the blue sky. Then in a voice that sounded as if he were discussing the weather he asked, "How would you like to inflate it this morning?"

I must have looked like I had been hit with a bag of wet sand because he laughed and said, "Well! Do you or don't you?"

"Sure," I said. "At least . . . I think so."

As a chase crew member this was something I hadn't even considered ever being allowed to do. Sure, Judy and I had

talked of eventually owning our own balloon, but this was George's balloon and he flew it. I had never seen George allow anyone else to inflate his balloon. One time he had allowed a girl friend to squeeze the handle on the burner once or twice, but that was because he was standing right there at the same time.

There were good reasons for this. Of all the jobs involved with launching a hot air balloon, the hot inflation part requires some of the greatest skill. Most of the burn holes on balloons occurred while the initial heat was being put into the envelope and the balloon was being uprighted. George was exceptionally good at inflating, but we had watched many other pilots sweat blood as they tried to get the balloon up and still not burn it. Even George sometimes sweat blood, and on the rare occasion when he did burn the envelope, we all felt a sadness like looking at a beautiful animal that had been wounded.

As we walked around to the gondola I tried frantically to remember everything I could about the many times I had watched George inflate. Instead I kept thinking about the first time I had held the throat and wondered if my pants would burn.

"Step in between the uprights and turn on the pilot valve and the number one fuel tank," George instructed.

The gondola was triangular-shaped and when it was on its side, the uprights and burner pointed into the throat of the envelope. The number one tank was in the upper point of the triangle of the basket. I felt for the valve handles and found that nothing seemed to be where I remembered seeing it. I ducked my head into the gondola to try to see what I couldn't feel and knocked my hat off.

"You aren't nervous, are you, Cal?" George chuckled.

"You didn't give me enough warning for me to get nervous," I replied in what I hoped was a confident voice.

Trying to turn the valves on from this position was a lot like trying to find a light switch in the dark after you have knocked the lamp off the night stand. I finally got both valves on and checked the hose connections at the burner head. This consisted of sniffing the connections to see if any gas was leaking. I banged my head on the uprights this time and George

chuckled again. Lighting the pilot went a little better and finally everything was ready for heating the air in the envelope.

"OK, I want you to tilt the basket up at a slight angle and point the burner right in the middle of the throat and give about a one second blast. Watch the fabric to be sure you don't touch it with the flame and burn it."

Burn it! Oh my God! I had visions of slashing a gigantic hole in the side of the balloon. Laurlie and Philip were holding open the throat and they didn't look like they had too much confidence in my abilities either. I took a deep breath and tried to compose my features. It probably didn't matter. Both kids were watching the burner like it was a snake about to strike. I squeezed the handle on the burner and a thirty foot column of flame leapt into the gaping throat of the envelope. The heat rippled the fabric of the envelope and I could see it rise as the heat reached the highest point.

"Let the heat spread until the fabric on the upper edge of the envelope begins to drop. Then hit it with another one to two second blast."

I followed the instructions carefully while George talked into my ear, pointing out the mechanics of how the inflation was progressing. Suddenly the breeze changed and the side of the envelope started to cave in.

"Don't stop. Just keep the flame directed away from the caved in side," George instructed. "I'll pull it out and be back in a few seconds."

I gave the burner another carefully timed blast and the caved in side filled out as the wind shifted to blow from behind me. I waited for George to come back. After a few more seconds he still didn't appear so I gave the burner another blast. The balloon had almost filled out and was hovering, with most of the fabric off the ground.

"Where is George?" I asked, looking wildly from one side to the other.

"I don't know," Laurlie said from her position on the throat. "He was pulling out the side and then he just disappeared."

"Damn!" I thought. "What do I do now?"

I was starting to sweat more than a little bit, but I hit the burner one more time. Still no sign of George. My shoulder ached from tilting the gondola. I could see the balloon was

ready to be stood up. I had watched George do the final stage dozens of times; maybe I should go ahead and finish the inflation. On the other hand, if I did it before I was told and something went wrong, George would probably break his rule of never yelling and tear my head off. I hit the burner once more and the envelope started to lift from the ground.

"Too late to stop now," my mind wailed and I turned the burner on full blast for the final stage. I felt behind me with one foot for the edge of the basket. As the balloon came up I had to be standing in the gondola or it would fly away without me.

The envelope lifted off the ground like a giant rising from his bed. The roar of the burner was breathing life into a being. The whole balloon became an extension of me and tears came to my eyes. The canopy was now over me and heat from the burner poured down around me. The envelope breathed in the heat and filled out. I could feel the gondola becoming lighter as the envelope tugged at the support ropes. Finally, I let go of the burner handle and stood in the silence looking at the bright multi-colored world above me. The balloon swayed gently. Even though I had watched this hundreds of times, this time it was like I was really seeing it for the first time. Little details about the balloon stood out in sharp relief. I checked for burns and amazingly there were none. I had made it.

I finally tore my eyes away from the balloon and looked around me. I became aware people were crowded around the gondola, laughing and talking to me. The beat of my heart pounded in my ears and I felt an exhilaration that could not have been equaled by any drug. George walked in, holding the crown line, with a big grin on his face.

"I was wondering if you were ever going to get around to finishing the job," he said. He held out his hand. "You did all right."

"Where did you go?" I asked.

"The wind was changing so I went out on the crown line. I figured you had watched me do it enough times you would either have enough guts to finish the job, or pull the top out."

George and I exchanged places and George called for Laurie and Philip to climb in. He said something about they deserved a ride after going through something like that. I put

my arm around Judy and she squeezed my waist. George looked at me and I knew that he knew what I was feeling. I shook my head in wonder and he just smiled. I had become part of a very special fraternity. We shared something that can be shared only by doing it. Judy looked up at me.

"God! That was great," I said to her. "I never felt anything like that in my life."

Judy looked at me and then at George. "Darn you, George," she said in mock anger. "I think you just did it to me."